

# Camilo's Closet: Sexual Camouflage in Denevi's *Rosaura a las diez*

Herbert J. Brant

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis

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Marco Denevi is one of Argentina's most influential and important prose writers. One of the most distinctive features of his writing is the creation of a situation in which a presumed truth has been concealed with a mask. Consequently, in Denevi's work there always seems to be an uneasy tension, a nagging suspicion that something is definitely not what it appears to be. As the reader proceeds through the narration, the numerous false façades that hide the unexpected, and sometimes shocking truth lying underneath are slowly chipped away. Denevi's numerous *informes* (reports), *vindicaciones* (vindications), and *versiones* (versions) of people, historical events, literary characters, and Western beliefs consistently reveal Denevi's conviction that truth is covered by a superficial veneer, suggesting that layer after layer of built-up illusion and falsification have completely obscured reality. Denevi's mission, it seems, is the work of stripping away all the falseness in order to get down to the glaring truth, however pleasant or unpleasant that might be. Consequently, Denevi's writing shows a marked tendency for the ironic surprise ending: the narration leads the reader on, very carefully setting up a specific set of expectations, only to violate them suddenly in the end by revealing unexpected pieces of information. This surprising alteration of the appearances that earlier had been taken for granted provides the reader with a flash of revelation that forces a reappraisal of every detail that had come before. One could say, then, that Denevi's work is the "outing" of a truth that, for whatever reason, had been "closeted" by a series of falsifications.

A related aspect of Denevi's fiction is the painstakingly detailed creation of a character's personal identity that, later, is exposed to be something completely different. This feature is manifested frequently in characters who pretend to be something or someone they are not: Leonides Arrufat in *Ceremonia secreta* (*Secret Ceremony*) allows herself to play the part of a disturbed young girl's dead mother, and Adalberto Pascumo in *Un pequeño café* (*A Small Café*) assumes the role of an office executive when he is, in fact, merely a file clerk.

But it is in Denevi's best known novel, *Rosaura a las diez* (*Rosa at Ten O'clock*), that the masking of characters is most complex and satisfying. This complexity of character, along with other sophisticated narrative elements, makes the novel not only an elegant work of fiction, but also an enormously popular one. Evidence of its popularity are a rather successful adaptation of the novel to film, and, perhaps more important, an American student edition of the text. The student edition of *Rosaura a las diez* makes it one of the most widely read Latin American novels. In spite of the novel's popularity, it seems that one particular feature of the main character's identity has gone unperceived and unnoticed by readers and critics. Because the narration deliberately creates a confusion regarding the identity and existence of Rosaura, the reader is made to focus attention on her. While the reader is busy piecing together all the clues surrounding Rosaura, the mystery of Camilo Canegato's identity as a closeted homosexual goes unexamined. The purpose of this study, then, is to investigate the results of an invisible, veiled, and oppressed sexuality that forms the central motivating factor in *Rosaura a las diez*.

*Rosaura a las diez*, like most detective fiction, is a novel that presents the reader with a false view of reality throughout the bulk of the work, only to expose the falseness and reveal the truth in the final few pages. The novel, therefore, proceeds on two levels. The first, the mystery level, as Lichtblau has indicated, is the story told in five parts, each with its own particular narrative point of view, thereby presenting the reader with an incomplete, partial and lopsided impression of the story. The second level, underlying the first, is the truth, unknown to the reader until the end of the novel. The testimonies of the different narrator-characters that make up the first-level narrative come as the result of a police inquiry into the death of a woman

named "Rosaura." Each of the narrator-characters living at the boarding house La Madrileña adds a few more pieces to the puzzle that surrounds the identity of Rosaura. The different narrators tell the story of one of their fellow boarders, a quiet, self-effacing portrait painter and painting restorer named Camilo Canegato who falls in love with the very mysterious and beautiful Rosaura. Camilo and Rosaura eventually get married, but on their wedding night Rosaura is found murdered and Camilo, naturally, is the most likely suspect. The novel progresses with each of the narrative segments revealing information known only to certain characters and culminating in the resolution of the mystery surrounding the identity of Rosaura, her relationship to Camilo Canegato, and her murder.

When discussing this novel, most critics have concentrated on the way in which the text conceals and reveals the mysterious identity of "Rosaura," the woman who is real, but at the same time, unreal. The final pages of the novel disclose the secret of Rosaura: she is a former prostitute whose real name is María Correa (a.k.a. Marta Córrega), and Camilo Canegato has used her as a prop to play the part of the imaginary lover he has told all his fellow boarders about. Because Camilo is such a painfully shy and lonely man, he invents a girlfriend: "Otros sueñan que son millonarios. Yo soñé que una mujer me amaba" (*Obras completas* 1.265) ["Other men dream about becoming millionaires. I dreamed that a woman loved me" (*Rosa at Ten O'clock* 160)]. The reader later discovers that the personality and life story of "Rosaura" is only a fiction elaborated in the mind of Camilo, and that to provide visual proof of her existence for the others, he has used a picture of the real María Correa, without her knowledge. María, it turns out, is the daughter of a woman who had done Camilo's laundry. For a little extra income, María's mother arranges with Camilo to use her as a prostitute, enticing him with her photograph. Camilo visits her regularly for a time, but when María suddenly disappears, he is told that she has died. Assuming that he will never see her again, Camilo decides to use her picture as the base for a painted portrait. Unfortunately for Camilo, he does not know that María is, in fact, not dead; she has merely gone to prison. When she gets out, she again is forced to depend on prostitution for survival. Desperate to escape her abusive pimp, El Turco Estropeado (Slit Turk),

María finally remembers the only person who might be able to provide her with a safe haven: that odd man her mother used to do laundry for, Camilo Canegato. She finds his address and when she arrives at the boarding house, much to her surprise, everyone in the house acts as if they know her and are perfectly delighted to see her. They call her "Rosaura" and are ready to cater to her every need. When faced with the choice between returning to her pimp, and pretending to be a person named Rosaura inside a very protected environment, María agrees to keep Camilo's secret, playing along that she really is the tragic heiress Rosaura. Despite a mutual loathing from the days when Camilo used María as a prostitute, the momentum of their charade and the emotional investment of the boarders in their romance propel María and Camilo into a real wedding. Immediately after the marriage ceremony, María and Camilo unknowingly check into a hotel owned by El Turco, who, in an act of revenge, murders María.

As it turns out, everything that the reader has learned about Rosaura's entire existence—her past, present and future—all are the products of Camilo's mind. He invents her, he molds her and breathes life into her. But why? Why does Camilo need to create an *imaginary* woman to love, rather than going out and meeting real flesh and blood women? What is the particular value for him of a woman who (he thinks) has no material reality and who exists solely in his imagination, inaccessible to the scrutiny of others? It seems that mere loneliness really cannot account for his strange need to fabricate a lover. There must be something peculiar, something "queer" about Camilo that forces him into an affair with a woman that doesn't exist. For me, the mystery of Rosaura's identity is best understood as the result of the societal exigencies on the main character, Camilo Canegato, to disguise his private homosexual orientation with the grand display of a public (heterosexual) identity. In short, the enigma of *Rosaura a las diez* really revolves around how Camilo carefully builds a closet and the disastrous consequences that result from such a construction. The closet, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has so brilliantly analyzed, becomes the centralizing location for the secrecy and obscurity surrounding a gay man's identity, the withholding and masking of information: "[t]he *special* centrality of homophobic oppression in the twentieth century... has resulted from its inextricability from the question of knowledge

and the processes of knowing in modern Western culture at large" (33-34; original emphasis). It is this process of concealing, revealing and ultimate knowing that produces the mystery of Rosaura.

Camilo Canegato is the central axis around which the entire narration spins. The reader first meets Camilo through the narration and perspective of Mrs. Milagros Ramoneda de Perales, the owner of the modest, but self-reputedly respectable boarding house where Camilo comes to live. Mrs. Perales' first impression of him is somewhat favorable, but she notices something odd about Camilo:

Calzaba unos tremendos zapatos, los zapatos más estrambóticos que he visto yo en mi vida, color ladrillo, con aplicaciones de gamuza negra, y unas suelas de goma... Así querrá él aumentarse la estatura, pero lo que conseguía era tomar ese aspecto ridículo del hombre calzado con tacos altos, como dicen que iban los duques y los marqueses en otros tiempos, cuando entre tanto lazo y tanta peluca y tanta media de seda y encajes y plumas, todos parecían mujeres, y, como yo digo, para saber quién era hombre, harían como hacían en mi pueblo con los chiquillos que por los carnavales se disfrazaban de mujer. (*OC* 1.43)

[He was wearing a pair of huge shoes, the most outlandish shoes I've ever seen in my life, rust-colored, with chamois trim, and rubber soles so thick that it looked as if the little fellow had walked on wet cement and it had stuck to the bottom of his shoes. He wanted to increase his height this way, but all he managed to do was to take on the ridiculous appearance of a man wearing high heels, as they say dukes and marquises used to do in olden times, when, with all those bows and wigs and silk stocking, they all looked like women; in order to find out which was a man, they must have done what they did in my home town with the boys who dressed up as women during carnival time. (*Rosa* 8)]

In this passage, Mrs. Perales suggests that Camilo's outward appearance is a mask—drag—, calling into question his sexual orientation. The initial presentation of Camilo in the novel immediately throws doubt on the character's identity as a male, thus creating in the reader a nagging uncertainty about Camilo's sexuality.

Mrs. Perales goes on to describe Camilo as well-behaved, quiet, but above all, exceptionally shy and timid. When he first moves into her house, he cannot look people in the eye and immediately blushes when spoken to. His shyness around women, however, is particularly intense. As Mrs. Perales describes it, "[s]u timidez, especialmente con las mujeres, era casi una *enfermedad*. Recuerdo que tenía yo una pensionista, mujer de rompe y rasga, artista de teatro. La Chelo, le decían. ¡Ay, Jesús! El terror que infundía en Camilo la sola presencia de La Chelo es cosa de no creerlo" (*OC* 1.58; emphasis added) ["[h]is shyness, especially with women, was almost *chronic*. I remember I used to have a boarder, a woman to be wary of, who was a stage performer. La Chelo, they called her. Lord! You wouldn't believe the terror that just her presence would inspire in Camilo" (*Rosa* 17; emphasis added)]. Camilo's terror around women, especially those whose sexuality is prominent (as suggested by her profession and her nickname that emphasizes a shapely figure) implies that real women, women of flesh, repel him. This same repulsion is repeated in a conversation between Camilo and Mrs. Perales:

—Don Canegato, lo que usted necesita es casarse.

—¿Casarme? ¿Casarme?—repetía, mirándome todo *azorado, como si yo le propusiese alguna inmoralidad*.

—Sí señor, casarse, que es, si no me equivoco, lo que hacen los solteros. (*OC* 1.61; emphasis added)

[On other occasions, I would say, "Mr. Canegato, what you need is to get married."

"Get married? Married?" he would repeat, gazing at me in *horror, as if I had suggested something immoral*.

"Yes, sir, get married—which, if I'm not mistaken, is what bachelors often do." (*Rosa* 20; emphasis added)]

At first, because of Camilo's lack of contact with the opposite sex, it is supposed that he has no sexuality of any kind. As time passes, and Mrs. Perales' three daughters develop into adolescent girls, Camilo, who has never shown any sexual interest in women, goes

through a series of identity changes in the house: “Y él, que antes había sido como un hermano mayor, después fue como un tío soltero de todas ellas, o como el padrino de un lejano bautismo ya olvidado” (*OC* 1.63) [“And he, who once had been their older brother, now became a bachelor uncle to all of them, or maybe more like the godfather of a distant, now-forgotten baptism” (*Rosa* 21)]. Camilo's presence as an adult male has never been viewed in sexual terms, and now that the girls are maturing, Camilo's role must be altered in order to adapt to changes in them. Camilo has now acquired the honorary title of “bachelor uncle,” which, as is quite well known, a common euphemism for a middle-aged man who does not seem to possess any sexuality, at least not a putatively normal one, because he does not appear to conform to society's heterosexist standard.

Once Mrs. Perales has brought Camilo's status out into the open as an unmarried adult male in a house full of young adolescent girls, letters suddenly start to arrive for him. They are written on perfumed pink paper with “una letra redondita, pequeña, prolija. Vamos, una letra de mujer” (*OC* 1.65) [the “small, round, fastidious script of a woman” (*Rosa* 22)]. Considering Camilo's isolation from appropriately available women, and his almost pathological shyness, news of the letters spreads throughout the boarding house, with the boarders inventing a multiplicity of theories to explain Camilo's sudden contact with women. The writer of the letters, the person with the woman's handwriting is, of course, Camilo himself writing under the delightfully suggestive name “Rosaura.” The letters will provide Camilo with cover, camouflage, the deceptive masquerade of a (hetero-)sexual relationship. The strategy of using forgery for deceptive purposes is nothing new for Camilo. The reader discovers later, during Camilo's interrogation by the police, that his aptitude for outright fakery and deceit is very well developed. His profession as an oil painting restorer is complemented by his ability to *forge* the work of other painters, imitating their style: “Yo me especializo en la escuela inglesa. Tenía un cliente que era loco por Reynolds. Me entregó quince fotografías de otros tantos familiares, para que yo se las convirtiese en quince retratos al estilo de Reynolds. Quedó muy satisfecho y me pagó bien...Imitar, je, je, imitar no es difícil” (*OC* 1.251); [“...I'm a specialist in

the English school. I used to have a client who was mad over Reynolds. He gave me fifteen photographs of family members and had me convert them into fifteen portraits done in the Reynolds style. He was delighted and paid me handsomely... Imitate—ha, ha—it's not hard to imitate" (*Rosa* 150)]. Like the letters, Camilo's painting is not dedicated to the expression of his own interior reality, but rather to the imitation of an exterior, *other* reality. So, too, his sexuality becomes the public imitation of an extrinsic model, on display like a painting, rather than the manifestation of his own innate desires.

In order for the forged letters to serve their special purpose, their contents must become public knowledge. So just in case Mrs. Perales isn't sneaking into his room to read the letters—and indeed she is!—Camilo sends a letter to the boarding house without an addressee, without his own name, thereby making it the property of the house itself, or rather Mrs. Perales, its owner, with the result that its message will become known to everyone in the house.

Once the affair has circulated among the boarders and they have discovered that Camilo's sexual activities fall into the societally approved, normal category, the painter creates what might seem to be the perfect reason—or excuse—to put an end to the affair and to put the charade to rest. Camilo invents the story of Rosaura's cruel and brutal father who promises her to another, more suitable man, thereby making it impossible for Rosaura and Camilo to marry, much less to see each other ever again. This use of an angry and threatening father-figure seems to display unmistakably classic Freudian undertones. Part of Freud's Oedipal theory posits that "fear of a father is set up because, in the very earliest years, he opposes a boy's sexual activities" (190). Closely related to the fear of Rosaura's father is Camilo's apparent feeling of persecution. Notable, too, is Freud's conclusion that "*paranoia persecutoria* is the form of the disease in which a person is defending himself against a homosexual impulse which has become too powerful" (424). In other words, Camilo's explanation for the tragic and sudden ending to his affair with Rosaura serves not only to release him from the pressures of the deceitful tale of romance, but also to reveal, consciously or unconsciously, his erotic attraction to



men. At this point, with the insurmountable opposition of Rosaura's father, it seems that Camilo can finally breathe a sigh of relief from the pressure of having to keep up the appearances required by the fictional account that marks his entry into the world of "compulsory heterosexuality." He has fulfilled his obligations to the societal demands that he publicly conform to the one and only acceptable sexual behavior.

Unfortunately for Camilo, though, the charade does not come to an end as neatly as he had hoped and planned. Due to the fact that Camilo has actively encouraged a sense of ownership of the romance between him and Rosaura, the boarders, especially Mrs. Perales, will not permit him simply to give her up. In order to goad him into action, Mrs. Perales again calls Camilo's manliness and sexual orientation into question when she insists that he "fight like a *man*" for Rosaura instead of collapsing under the brutal demands of the father: "¿Y usted lo va a permitir? ¿Y usted es hombre? ¿Pero qué clase de amor es el suyo, que se amilana a la primera dificultad?" (OC 1.145; emphasis added) ["Are you going to permit it? *And you call yourself a man?* What kind of love do you feel anyway if you run off terrified at the first scare?" (Rosa 75; emphasis added)]. Mrs. Perales' humiliation tactics, however, do not have time to take effect. Camilo's masquerade takes an unexpected turn: while everyone in the boarding house is having dinner, "Rosaura" (María) suddenly appears at the front door. With Rosaura's arrival, Camilo finds himself hopelessly trapped inside the fiction he has created to give himself a public heterosexual identity. He is forced to keep up the deceit all the way to the altar and the honeymoon bed, with tragic results.

One of the boarders, David Réguel, however, is not convinced in the slightest of any seriousness in the relationship between Camilo and Rosaura; he sees right through Camilo's pretense. Is there something special about David that provides him with such insight into and understanding of Camilo's situation? The first clue comes when Camilo insists that Mrs. Perales not let David know about his "affair" with Rosaura (OC 1.120). It is not clear exactly why Camilo should object to David's having that knowledge, since everything Camilo

has done up to this point is calculated precisely to make his affair with Rosaura as widely known by the boarders in the house as he possibly can.

The most important clues to David's ability to perceive the deceit in Camilo's affair are contained in his testimony to the police. The title of this section of the novel is called "David canta su salmo" ["David Sings His Psalm"]. The reference to the biblical psalmist might seem gratuitous at first glance, but for me such an allusion also makes a veiled reference to David's intimate relationship with Jonathan: "Then said Jonathan unto David, Whatsoever thy soul desireth, I will even do it for thee" (I Sam. 20:4); "And Jonathan caused David to swear again, because he loved him: for he loved him as he loved his own soul" (I Sam. 20:17); "I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan: very pleasant hast thou been unto me: thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women" (II Sam. 1:26). By means of the title of David's testimony and the information within it, Denevi has set up a very strong doubt in the mind of the reader with regard to David Réguel's sexuality and his relationship to Camilo Canegato. If the two men were indeed involved emotionally or physically, the presence of Rosaura and the attention paid to her would certainly place a heavy strain on their relationship.

The strain becomes clear on three separate occasions when Mrs. Perales mentions that David is trying to make Camilo *jealous*. But of what or of whom? Is Camilo supposed to be jealous of Rosaura or of David? In the first instance, when everyone sees the portrait of Rosaura for the first time, Mrs. Perales tells the reader that David insists that he has actually seen this person named Rosaura. Naturally, Camilo is terrified and Mrs. Perales concludes that David is only saying that he knows her in order "clavarle una banderilla y darle celos y hacerlo sufrir" (OC 1.129); "to irritate Camilo, to make him jealous and upset him" (Rosa 65). Translated literally, however, Mrs. Perales is asserting that David was saying that he knew Rosaura in order to "stab him [Camilo] with a banderilla" (the brightly colored spears used by matadors in the bullring). Her statement is odd considering that it has never been revealed why David would be angry enough to wound Camilo intentionally and maliciously—unless there were some reason that only the two of them knew. The symbolic implications of

this phrase—the imagery of David wanting to penetrate Camilo with an unmistakably phallic instrument—only reinforces the notion that there is a sexual link between the two men.

Later on, when Rosaura moves into the boarding house, Mrs. Perales observes David Réguel shamelessly fawning over Rosaura despite the fact that Rosaura is engaged to Camilo. Strangely enough, this unusual behavior does not seem to have any visible effect on Camilo: “[e]n Camilo tampoco noté nada raro. Celoso, desde luego, y ya se imaginará usted de quién” (*OC* 1.175); “I didn't notice anything especially odd about Camilo's behavior either. He was jealous, of course, and you can imagine of whom” (*Rosa* 95). Mrs. Perales' phrase is playfully ambiguous here, leaving the reader to wonder whether Camilo is jealous of Rosaura or of David. It does appear quite obvious, however, that David's highly exaggerated and theatrical performance could not possibly be considered a serious attempt at seducing Rosaura. The fact that David is making such a blatant public display indicates that he is less concerned with attracting Rosaura than he is with letting everyone see his interest in someone of the opposite sex, especially the person who is supposedly engaged to Camilo, while at the same time inflicting an emotional wound on Camilo.

The final instance when Mrs. Perales declares that Camilo must have been jealous comes when Camilo and Rosaura have a loud screaming fight. David comes into the room to comfort Rosaura and he then proceeds to insult Camilo. Again, with her characteristic, deliberate imprecision, Mrs. Perales tells her interlocutor and the reader: “saque usted de esto las deducciones y las consecuencias que más le gusten. Yo me reservo las mías. Y digan después que Camilo no tenía razón de estar celoso” (*OC* 1.177); “draw your own deductions and conclusions. And I'll draw mine. Just don't let anyone say that Camilo never had any justification for being jealous!” (*Rosa* 97). It seems likely that Mrs. Perales, not understanding the nature of the relationship either between Camilo and Rosaura or between Camilo and David, makes the mistaken assumption that it must be Camilo who is jealous. On the contrary, what Mrs. Perales describes demonstrates that the jealousy is emanating from David. Seeing the object of his desire, Camilo, continuing his relationship with Rosaura, David tries deperately, in

more and more intrusive ways, to sabotage the seemingly inevitable wedding between Rosaura and Camilo.

With jealousy and a sense of betrayal as primary motives, David's statement to the police can be viewed from a perspective that casts doubt not only on the two men's sexuality and their relationship to each other, but also on the veracity of David's view of the incidents leading up to Rosaura's murder and his psychological analysis of Camilo. David makes it clear from the very beginning of his narration that he believes reality to have a false front and that he is able to discern the truth behind the disguise: "yo soy de aquellos que no ignoran que la realidad tiene dos caras, qué, dos caras, veinte caras, cien caras, y que la cara que más a menudo nos muestra es falsa y hay que saber buscarle la verdadera" (*OC* 1.190) ["I am one of those people who is aware that reality has two faces. What am I saying, two faces? It has twenty, a hundred, and the one most often shown to us is false and one must learn how to look for the real one" (*Rosa* 107)]. David views his goal, then, as the exposing—the outing—of Camilo Canegato's true nature for all the world to see: he is "un biombo, un biombo de simulación, de mimetismo, pero yo le quitaré para ustedes esa pantalla y ustedes lo verán tal cual es. [...] No es un hombre. Es la *maquette* de un hombre, la muestra gratis" (*OC* 1.190) ["[a] protective screen has been surrounding Camilo Canegato, a screen of pretense, of mimetism, but I'll remove that screen for you and you will see him for what he is. [...] He's not a man. He's the *maquette* of a man, the free sample" (*Rosa* 107)]. And David knows what he's talking about: like himself, Camilo is forced to live a life composed of deceptive appearances and false façades that hide his own authentic identity. As a homosexual trying to survive in a threatening and unsympathetic society, Camilo ceases to exist as a "real man" and is forced to convert himself into an artificial creature by the requirements of the closet and its "excruciating system of double binds" (Sedwick 70).

Camilo Canegato's forced deception, the creation of a heterosexual partner, has very tragic consequences. First is the betrayal of Camilo's identity and dignity as a human being. Camilo is spiritually and emotionally murdered by a heterosexist system of

oppression from which there is no escape. Camilo's chronic timidity and shyness, the result of an overwhelming sense of fear of other people, his inability to function on more than a mere subsistence level of existence, and his crushing self-effacement condemn him to a perpetual state of self-murder.

In *Rosaura a las diez*, Camilo Canegato lives a miserable, depressing, and hopeless life because the patriarchal, homophobic society in which he lives forces him to submit to a narrowly defined model of human sexual behavior. With such pressure to conform to a norm that does not permit any diversity or authenticity, he is compelled to conceal his own essential nature as a homosexual and, as a consequence, create a falsified self-identity. The dishonesty and deception takes on a life of its own, multiplying, growing out of control, until the power of its falseness annihilates his own sense of self. Camilo's falsified self-identity represents the ultimate dangers and degradations of the closet. For Camilo, the closet is not a place of refuge and security that safeguards him from the inquisitive and punishing scrutiny of society's enforcers of sexual orthodoxy; it is, instead, a prison cell, a cage that neatly binds and restricts him for easy persecution. Because creating and accepting a closet is tantamount to creating and accepting one's own victimization by an oppressive and unjust force, the closet destroys, rather than protects. As Richard D. Mohr so eloquently asserts: "Life in the closet is morally debased—and morally debasing. It frequently requires lying, but it always requires much more. [...]" The life as lie chiefly entails a devolution of the person as person, as moral agent. The whiteness of the individual lies might be forgiven as self-defense, but the dirtiness of the secret that the lies maintain cannot be. The dirt is the loss of self, of personhood, the loss of that which makes human life peculiarly worth protecting to begin with" (32).

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